Article

Dimensions of recognition through relational labour in erotic content creation in Brazil

Lorena Caminhas 🄳

University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands; Maynooth University, Ireland

Abstract

Relational labour has become a critical concept for understanding the consequences of the ongoing relationship between creators and their audiences on social media. This article draws on this discussion to address Brazilian erotic content creators' perceptions of the impact of relational labour on their sense of self and subjective identity. Combining the concept with the idea of recognition as conceived in the Psychodynamics of Work, the article explores the subjective investment and identity development involved in the continual creator–audience intersubjective relationships. Based on 31 in-depth interviews with Brazilian erotic creators, the article reveals a deep subjective investment in performing relational labour and its impact on creators' self-esteem and self-relationship, with the potential to strengthen their subjective identity and social value. Nevertheless, the symbolic rewards of relational labour are an effort rather than a guarantee, especially in highly stigmatised work where the distribution of in intersubjective relationships is uneven.

Keywords

Erotic content creation, recognition, relational labour, stigmatisation, subjectivity

Introduction

The article explores the consequences of relational labour for erotic content creators in Brazil, questioning creators' subjective perceptions of the outcomes of continual

Corresponding author:
Lorena Caminhas, 10 Grove Park, Rathmines, Ireland D06 P302, Ireland.
Email: lorenarubia.pereirac@mu.ie

interactions with their audiences. Using the Brazilian case as a paradigmatic example, it argues for the adoption of a critical background of subjectivity and identity formation at work when analysing relational labour, aiming to explore in depth its impact in terms of recognition for creative workers.

Relational labour has become a critical concept for understanding the changing landscape of contemporary cultural production. By focusing on the new forms of interaction between producers and audiences, it highlights the growing need for permanent and extended relationships built through social media (Baym, 2015, 2018). The concept gains momentum in the context of the emergence of the social media entertainment industry (Cunningham and Craig, 2019), where professionals from various fields pursue a career as social media creators and cultivate audiences to build sustainable enterprises (Bishop, 2025; Cunningham and Craig, 2021). This includes erotic content creators who are compelled not only to engage with their audiences through various social media (Easterbrook-Smith, 2022) but also to develop ongoing intimate interactions with users on sex platforms.

It should be emphasised that relational labour critically accounts for the consequences of maintain relationships with audiences, in particular how they affect cultural workers' wellbeing and mental health (Baym, 2018). Even existing literature based on the concept draws attention to the issue, explaining the subjective effects of relational labour (Glatt, 2024; Hair, 2021). Nevertheless, I contend that little attention has been paid to the role of ongoing interaction with audiences in workers' self-perception and identity formation. This dimension helps to nuance the ambivalent impact of relational labour on workers' subjectivities. Furthermore, understanding this dimension for workers in stigmatised cultural production, as in the case of erotic content creation, serves to complexify the role of power dimensions in relational labour, which merits further academic analysis.

Erotic content creators can be understood as a subset of creator work (Caminhas, 2025; Rand and Stegeman, 2023). It consists of creators who produce various content formats involving the depiction of sex and eroticism – videos, photos, clips and live streaming performances – for different paid (sex) platforms. More and more, erotic creators have become dependent on social media to draw consumers to their profiles on paywalled platforms that allow the sale of sexual content (Cardoso and Scarcelli, 2021; Easterbrook-Smith, 2022). This is because these platforms drive traffic from creators promoting links on social media, making creators dependent on their followings to have paying customers (Easterbrook-Smith, 2022). In addition, paywalled platforms model themselves on social media, mimicking their interactive structure to facilitate the sale of sex and eroticism. It means that erotic creators engage in relational labour across platforms, cultivating ongoing intimate relationships with audiences in multiple settings and through varied interactional formats.

In Brazil, erotic creators engage in cross-platform practices to perform relational labour. They typically combine social media platforms like Instagram and Twitter, messaging apps like Telegram and Whatsapp with interactions on paywalled platforms where access is by subscription or pay-per-minute. In this sense, they engage in relational labour through paid and unpaid interactions in order to cultivate both a following and a base of subscribers. It should be noted that on paid platforms some interactions

are free of charge and serve to keep subscribers in close contact with the creator (Veiverberg, 2023). The most used paid platforms are OnlyFans, Privacy[1] and Camera Prive[2], since Brazilian erotic content creators tend to sell multiple content formats, splitting between patronage platforms and live streaming performance platforms. In the Brazilian context, relational labour is the way to make erotic content creation sustainable in the long term.

Notably, Brazil has a heated consumer market for erotic content, especially online. The country ranks 10th in the world in access to porn online, with at least 22 million people admitting to consuming it (Fernandes, 2023). Of these, 76% are men and 58% are under 35 (Fernandes, 2023), and one of the main ways they access erotic content is through social media (Giusti and Torres, 2024). National sex platforms – Privacy and Camera Prive – receive around 44 million monthly visitors and drive around 28.89% of their traffic via social media, mainly Instagram (Similarweb, 2024).

In addition, Brazil has a highly open and supportive environment for platform-based work, particularly erotic content creation, with more than 100 million of people engaged in this sector (Neto, 2023). The country's large digital economy, widespread social media usage and relatively permissive regulatory landscape (Abilio, 2020) have positioned Brazil as a key market for adult content (Neto, 2023), where platforms provide new opportunities for financial independence and self-branding. And yet the Brazilian society is one of the most conservative regarding the consumption of erotic content, due to sexist views on gender roles that foster a high level of prejudice and harm against erotic workers (Díaz-Benitez, 2018).

It is within this context of sexism and stigmatisation that erotic creators navigate relational labour, balancing the dangers and rewards that come from it.

Studies of relational labour for erotic content creators are still scarce, even though creators are increasingly dependent on it. In addition, erotic creators have not been included in studies of relational work in the platform-based creative economy. This article aims to fill this gap by drawing on Brazilian creators' narratives about their relationships with audiences. Results show that relational labour has profound consequences for creators' subjective identities, affecting their self-esteem and self-relationship. Overall, creators see positive outcomes from their relationships with audiences, which translate into recognition–a symbolic reward that gives them an improved self-esteem and sense of self-worth. However, due to the stigma of creating erotic content and the power imbalances it creates, recognition through relational labour is more of a struggle than a guaranteed achievement.

The findings contribute to a better understanding of the consequences of relational labour in creators' subjectivities in three ways: they point to the deep subjective investment involved in performing such labour and the symbolic reward in terms of recognition that can arise from it; the duality of ongoing relationships with audiences on creators' identities and self-perceptions; and the role of power imbalances in defining the distribution of recognition and disrespect along relational labour. Therefore, the case of erotic creators contributes to a more nuanced examination of relational labour's consequences, highlighting its ambivalent implications for creative workers' subjective identities and the role of power imbalances in this context.

Theoretical framework

Relational labour and workers' subjectivities

Relational labour captures the transformations in cultural work due to the growing centrality of social media platforms and how they shape interactions with audiences. According to Baym (2015, 2018), in this context, cultural producers must develop ongoing relationships with audiences through various social media to foster paid work. The author claims that the concept advances the idea of emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983) by going beyond the management of emotional expressions to include the building of intersubjective intimate relationships in the performance of work. The main consequence is the increasing blurring of the boundaries between work and personal life, including individual identities and emotions, with implications for workers' well-being and mental health (Baym, 2015). It should be noted that the implications are ambivalent since relational labour can be both alienating and rewarding, increasing unpaid labour and emotional distress while also providing validation and genuine friendship (Baym, 2018).

Although Baym's seminal perspective promotes a critique of the role of relational labour on workers' subjectivities under platform capitalism, it does not explore its impacts on subjective constitution and identity formation through the increasing pressure to maintain ongoing relationships with audiences. I argue that this is critical because work is an important domain for supporting subjectivity expectations (Dejours, 2014; Smith and Deranty, 2012b), which becomes even more crucial as intersubjective engagement deepens due to relational labour.

Furthermore, the issue has yet to be addressed by current scholarship based on the approach, which can be divided into three main research streams. The first explores the role of platform infrastructure and affordances in facilitating relational labour (Arriagada and Siles, 2024; Meisner and Ledbetter, 2022), showing how these materialities play a crucial role in shaping interactions with audiences. It discusses how cultural workers are under increasing pressure to adapt their relational dynamics to platforms, resulting in unequal opportunities to develop and sustain ongoing interactions (Arriagada and Siles, 2024). Platform materialities are therefore seen as another layer of disparity in relational labour.

A second one focuses on the toll of relational labour on workers, arguing that precarity is compounded by risks to mental health and online safety (Cunningham and Craig, 2019; Hair, 2021) and emotional alienation (Ye et al., 2023), especially for marginalised cultural workers (Glatt, 2024). While recognising that intimacy and genuine connection can be positive outcomes of relational labour, this stream shows that the dangers outweigh the benefits, particularly when workers' positionality is at stake. Power relations, particularly gender ones, are seen as making relational labour more unequal and harmful for creators (Tran, 2022; Ye et al., 2023).

The third stream emphasises the rewarding side of relational labour, exploring its role in building financial and emotional support for cultural workers (Bonifacio et al., 2023; Whitson et al., 2021) and solidarity between them and their audiences (Pruchniewska, 2017). It argues that although establishing and maintaining boundaries are major challenges, there is a significant opportunity to derive emotionally meaningful experiences

from relational labour that would enhance workers' well-being. Evans and Baym (2022) even identify opportunities to improve self-perception through relational labour. Nevertheless, it is associated with the acquisition of digital influence and social capital, but not as support for foundational subjective expectations about one's identity.

It should be noted that the last two streams fully address subjective experiences through relational labour. Nonetheless, they do not go as far as explaining its consequences at the deeper level of subjective identity constitution at work. This endeavour is crucial to further explain the consequences of relational labour for the contemporary cultural worker subject, notably when power relations are at stake. Therefore, a framework of work as a normative realm for identity formation is needed to explore how workers' subjectivities have been affected by the growing imperative of ongoing relationships with audiences on social media.

Relational labour in platformed erotic content creation

Academic literature has highlighted the growing importance of building relationships with audiences in platformed erotic content creation (Cardoso and Scarcelli, 2021; Wang, 2021). This is due to two main factors. First, such work is essentially interactive, with sex platforms providing various infrastructures for worker-consumer interactions that are modelled after social media's use patterns and interfaces (Easterbrook-Smith, 2022; Jones, 2020). Second, social media has become crucial for erotic creators' self-branding and promotion, being an integral component of the online sex commerce (Cardoso et al., 2022; Easterbrook-Smith, 2022). Taken together, these factors point to a trend towards cross-platform labour in this sector, in line with the wider creator industries (Hair et al., 2022). As a result, relational labour occurs across platforms, being projected onto the online ecosystem along with creators' selves and subjective identities.

Relational labour has been laterally addressed by the scholarship on erotic content creation. When examined, it is primarily in relation to the performance of sex and eroticism, with less emphasis on the imperative of maintaining an ongoing connection with audiences and its implications for workers. All in all, relational labour is said to encourage creators to develop an individual and sexual display of identity to intimately interact with audiences (Cardoso et al., 2022; Wang, 2021).

On one hand, relational labour increases the need for authenticity and intimacy with consumers, further blurring the boundaries between work and personal life (Cardoso et al., 2022). The result is an exacerbation of labour precarity since the pressure to bond with consumers strikes the fragile boundaries of creator-consumer relationship (Stardust, 2019). Furthermore, it would facilitate harassment and intimidation of erotic creators, making them more vulnerable (Jones, 2020; Stardust, 2019). On the other hand, there is the possibility of negotiating sexual identities and expressions through relational labour, which would contribute to enhancing creators' well-being and sense of agency (Wang, 2021). The impact of relational labour on the self and subjective identity of erotic workers has yet to be addressed in this scholarship.

As erotic content creation is permeated by gender conventions that have a major impact on the performance of such work (Cardoso and Scarcelli, 2021; Easterbrook-Smith, 2022), the scholarship has highlighted the power imbalances that take place in the

interaction with audiences (Stardust, 2019; Wang, 2021). It is critical because gender conventions influence interactions between creators and consumers, creating inequalities that can impose deep emotional and personal costs. I argue that this scenario offers an opportunity to further explore the interplay between identity formation, stigma and relational labour, and complicates the understanding of relational labour's consequences for marginalised creative workers.

Recognition and the role of subjectivity at work

To address subjectivity and identity formation through relational labour and fully understand the depth of its threats and rewards to workers, a critical framework for understanding subjectivity at work is required. I argue that the Psychodynamics of Work's concept of recognition at work serves as a normative framework for approaching subjectivity construction through recognitive relationships in relational labour.

The Psychodynamics of Work draws on a critical understanding of work as an activity in which a communicative act is performed and as a medium through which one relates to the world, to others and to oneself (Dejours, 2014). As Deranty (2010) explains, 'Work is the experience *par excellence* through which subjective life gets in touch with itself, feels itself and can develop henceforth' (p. 209), thus involving workers' identities and being central to self-relationship and self-fulfilment (Dejours et al., 2018).

This understanding is based on the concept of recognition at work, which captures the intersubjective act involved in the lived experience of work (Dejours et al., 2018) and functions as a projected symbolic compensation for the subjective investment (Dejours, 2012, 2014). It functions as the background against which the value of work and workers is ascribed. Dejours et al. (2018) define recognition as follows:

> Recognition designates the process of acknowledgement and confirmation that is afforded from an external perspective in response to a claim, a demand, a performance, or a statement of identity made by an individual (or a group of individuals for collective claims), from an internal perspective. (pp. 97–98)

Recognition at work acts thus as an endorsement of workers' subjective expectations and is a process through which 'some normative status is granted that has reality both for the subject enjoying it and in the eyes of the community to which the subject belongs' (Dejours et al., 2018: 98). It focuses on subjective constitution and identity formation through the working activity, drawing on Honneth to argue that an individual's sense of self is built upon the recognition they receive from others (Smith and Deranty, 2012a). Identity is thus defined as intersubjective and relational, fundamentally shaped by how one's subjective expectations are met or denied by others within social relations (Honneth, 1995).

Dejours et al. (2018) claim that identity formation in the context of work involves two dimensions, namely the recognition of what one is (e.g. social identity) and what one does (e.g. achievements and contributions). This means that workers' social position and performance at work, and how others value both, are important factors in developing positive self-relationship and identity. While earning recognition creates opportunities to

develop a strong sense of self, lack of recognition or misrecognition threatens workers' identity and social existence (Smith and Deranty, 2012b), testing and straining their subjective economies (Smith and Deranty, 2012a).

Since relational labour is primarily based on developing long-term relationships with audiences, further blurring the boundaries between the work and personal selves (Baym, 2018), it can be said to have an even deeper significance and impact on workers' subjectivities through the kinds of recognitive relationship developed within it. Recognition at work provides a robust concept for further understanding how workers' identities and subjectivities come into play in performing relational labour, as it sheds light on how workers seek to gain recognition or overcome misrecognition through the relationships they build with audiences and how this affects workers' identities and self-relationship (Dejours, 2014). Furthermore, the concept allows for a nuanced assessment of the kinds of opportunities and threats that relational labour poses to workers' subjective economies.

The Psychodynamics of Work argues that the distribution of recognition at work is uneven and deeply rooted in gender and sexual conventions (Dejours et al., 2018; Molinier, 2012), as recognition is embedded in a context where symbolic hierarchies and judgements are at play. Molinier (2012) shows that gendered work offers workers fewer opportunities for recognition due to social devaluation, which directly impacts workers' subjective identities. The author extrapolates the argument to morally devalued work, which, due to its depreciated status in society that is passed on to the workers, provides even fewer opportunities for workers to gain recognition. It further complicates the discussion around the dangers and rewards associated with subjective investment in work, demonstrating that power imbalances and social conventions are key components in understanding how recognition is given or denied at work (Dejours, 2014).

By placing inequalities and stratification at the heart of the subjective investment in work, recognition at work strengthens the perspective on power dynamics within relational labour, bringing them to the centre of analysis of relational labour's consequences for workers' subjectivities. This is particularly critical when considering marginalised platformed cultural workers, where recognition relationships are embedded in moral valuations, threatening workers' identities.

Erotic content creation is a sector where marginalisation and stigmatisation structured by gender and sexual hierarchies prevail (Easterbrook-Smith, 2022; Rand, 2019). Especially in Brazil, where high consumption of erotic content coexists with sexism and discrimination against erotic workers, exposing them to harm to their identity (Díaz-Benitez, 2018). Non-normative gender roles and sexual expressions have been subjected to moral and symbolic discipline (Rubin, 1984), which may be present in the relational labour that erotic creators perform with their audiences. Cultural work such as this requires a critical approach to subjectivity and identity formation through relational labour, which the concept of recognition at work provides.

Methods

The article is based on in-depth interviews with 31 Brazilian erotic content creators conducted over 2 years – mid-2017 to mid-2018 and 2022 – as part of a comprehensive study

of the platform-based sex trade in Brazil. Of the interviewees, 21 were cisgender women, 7 cisgender men and 3 transgender women; 23 were white, 4 Black, 3 brown and 1 Caboclo.[3] Most respondents were in their 20s or 30s and relied entirely on platformed erotic content production for income ($n = 21$). Fifteen respondents worked primarily in camming and the other 16 in content production for patronage platforms. Interviewees were recruited on Instagram and Twitter since these were the social media platforms most used by Brazilian erotic content creators to promote their work, and contacted via private messages using convenience and snowball sampling. The most active creators on social media, who were the most accessible to the researcher, were approached first, followed by those they identified as potential respondents. Only creators over 18 actively creating content were eligible. All were given an informed consent form and agreed to participate in the research voluntarily, and their names were replaced with pseudonyms to protect their privacy.

Interviews were conducted via video call, lasted approximately 1 hour and focused on three broad topics: personal and professional trajectories, work dynamics and sex platforms, and diversity, social inequalities and stratification. The questions were structured to explore the interviewees' sense-making of their work, their relationships with platforms and audiences, and their perceptions of themselves as workers and social subjects. The interviews were transcribed verbatim, revised and then analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022). Thematic analysis was conducted in three stages, guided by continuous engagement and reflection on data and its multiple meanings. First, patterns were identified within and across the interview topics, which were grouped into initial themes. Second, quotes were selected for each theme to help identify their primary meanings and to refine and collate the themes. Finally, the themes were revised by aligning patterns and meanings, and according to their significance and prevalence in the interviews. This article discusses two themes related to the creator–audience relationship and creators' self-perceptions resulting from this relationship.

Results

Erotic content creators see building long-term relationships with their audiences as a fundamental part of their work. They do this alongside paid and unpaid features on social media and sex platforms, by chatting privately and in groups on direct messages or messaging apps such as Telegram and WhatsApp, and by replying to comments on the platforms' feeds. Using interactive tools like question stickers and polls is also a way to keep engagement and the conversation going.

Interviewees recognise a fundamental tension in the relationships, as they can be sources of both fulfilling and degrading recognitive interactions. It is complicated by the fact that erotic content creation is deeply stigmatised (Stardust, 2019), and in the Brazilian context, the consumption is embedded in taboos around sex and conservative gender conventions (Díaz-Benítez, 2018). This undermines creators' value as workers and individuals, making gaining and maintaining recognition through relational labour an effort rather than a guarantee.

During the interviews, the recognition dimension of relational labour became visible through statements about self-perception and self-fulfilment, particularly in relation to

stigmatisation and its consequences for creators' personal and professional lives. Self-perception was embedded in narratives about the development of an improved self-esteem, which was said to be fostered when the creator–audience relationship resulted in an appreciation of creators' bodies and erotic selves. Self-fulfilment was discussed through accounts of acquiring positive self-relationship, which was said to occur when the relationships led to a validation creators' personalities and personal images.

Audience appreciation of creators' bodies and erotic selves

Erotic content creation is a labour intimately linked to the display of workers' bodies and erotic selves. The way in which these elements are addressed in interactions with users matters for how creators value themselves and how they understand the recognitive relationships they establish with their audiences.

Interviewees consider building an ongoing relationship with their followers as hard work that takes a lot of time and effort. Yet most of them view it as a fundamental and rewarding part of their work, closely linked to how they feel about themselves. Nina describes the importance of this connection to her self-perception: 'I like to connect with people on different levels because I get compliments that help my self-esteem and make me think differently about myself'. She goes on to explain that relational labour has a significant impact on her self-esteem because 'I always get compliments on my body, my face, how beautiful my silicone is, how beautiful my mouth is, or even how a part of my body that I hated and thought was ugly is seen as beautiful'.

Relational labour is taken as a way for creators to increase their self-esteem and to identify what is valuable in their bodies and erotic selves, acting as a ground for validating their physical traits and performance. Nina shows that it happens because of the intimate and emotional connection: 'talking and interacting to people on daily basis is a way of boosting that, because sometimes the affection is much greater, even compared to people in my personal relationships. It's hard work but it gives me an immensely greater reward'.

Most interviewees say that connecting with their audience is a motivation to keep creating content. Ava explores this point:

> It's fundamental for me to keep in touch with my audience because, for example, I did a photo shoot in 2007 where I was clearly uncomfortable, I wasn't happy with my body and the way I looked because I had no feedback, no contact with my costumers.

Recently, because of the more intimate relationship with her audience, 'I started to accept my body and that has a big impact on the content I produce, because now I feel beautiful, I feel good, and my consumers help me build it'. She shows how the intersubjective nature of the parasocial relationship supports her in developing a more affirming self-perception.

Interviewees' narratives point to the triangular interplay between recognition, parasocial relations and subjective constitution. They interestingly observe that the way they understand the audience's perception of them has a profound effect on how they see themselves. Here, the recognitive relationship cuts across their personal and professional

subjectivities, mediated by the development of an improved self-esteem. Dejours (2014) shows that self-esteem is not only a subjective perception, but is connected to experiences of social esteem at work, which ground the sense of one's own value. In this case, the link between relational labour and subjective expectations becomes clear, deepening the initial assumptions about its significance for workers' subjectivities (Baym, 2018). Another important function of relational labour is to help creators reassess how they value their bodies and themselves, as a tool for self-reflection. As Dejours et al. (2018) state, self-reflection is an active process for achieving recognition at work, where individuals become aware of their subjectivity and personal value by reflecting on their own actions from the perspective of others. Gabriel contends that 'this job plays an important role in my self-esteem, because I've always been ashamed of myself and my body, because I'm too skinny and effeminate, and that's not the most desirable type for a gay man'. According to him, building relationships with his audience 'made me see that I am beautiful and attractive, and gradually I started to see my value and the value of the work I do, and that's a big factor in helping me to have the self-esteem I have today'. The more the audience shows appreciation to creators' looks and performance, the more confident creators become in themselves and their personal qualities.

As a result, it encourages creators to take better care of themselves and invest in their well-being. Stimulation of self-care and self-development can be seen as an outcome of recognition at work, contributing to improving workers' subjective identities (Dejours, 2014). Thomas says that 'I've built up my self-confidence by doing this job, by talking to people, by being close to them. Because I was stimulated to take care of myself and my looks, to improve my physical form'. It has not only affected his self-esteem but also 'my sense of self-care and personal-development. I enjoy it because it feels good, and it gives me more confidence in myself'. Taking care of one's body is interpreted as self-development in that it allows one to appreciate and highlight one's best qualities. It is also seen as a way of overcoming the low self-esteem associated with erotic work. Lilian explains it:

> Many people start this job with low self-esteem because we have to deal with all kinds of shit, but when we are encouraged to take care of ourselves, we start to feel more beautiful and attractive. Knowing how other people value me makes me want to do more for myself.

In this narrative, interactions with users are taken as a source of validation from which creators draw strategies to feel better about themselves. It is precisely this validation that supports creators' subjective expectations of recognition and builds an intersubjective meaning horizon from which they can develop their self-esteem, derived from those positive aspects of their identity (Smith and Deranty, 2012b).

It is critical to note that performing erotic work has a significant impact on workers' subjectivities, especially due to the low status of such labour (Rand, 2019). The literature has taken this into account to discuss the potential harms of relational labour (Jones, 2020; Stardust, 2019), with consumers reinforcing the stigma onto workers. It also applies to gendered creators (Tran, 2022; Ye et al., 2023). As Molinier (2012) discusses, the status of the work performed has a direct impact on the distribution of recognition at work and has consequences for workers' subjectivities. Relational labour scholarship has

addressed this in terms of its detrimental effects on workers. The interviewees point to another side of this, revealing that interactions with the audience can be a source of self-esteem, even in a stigmatised work. Because recognitive relationships have the potential to reposition workers' self-worth and contributions in ways that lead to recognition (Molinier, 2012), creators can reassess their subjective identities in a positive way and find a symbolic compensation for their subjective investments in ongoing relationships with consumers.

Conversely, interviewees say that to engage in relational labour, they need to invest time and effort in developing their self-esteem to be confident enough to connect intimately with their audiences across platforms. In turn, this helps them to improve their self-perception. Angelica explains: 'I'm more confident in myself, in my looks and my body, because you have to develop your self-esteem and to be sure of yourself to be able to interact erotically with people on different platforms'. She recognises that the need to perform relational labour forces creators to prepare themselves carefully in order to protect their sense of self. Once the basis for relational labour has been established, interaction with the audience can serve to further strengthen creators' self-esteem:

> I feel good about having had the opportunity to develop this kind of relationship because I've become more confident about my sexuality and much more accepting of myself. I feel that I have developed the knowledge and confidence to withstand anything that comes my way that could harm me.

Angelica's narrative shows that creators prepare their subjectivities to counteract the damage of stigmatisation that may arise in the relationship with audiences. The pursuit of recognition through these relationships is a means of preparing and protecting creators' subjectivities. Molinier (2012) notes that in gendered work, it is common for workers to engage in self-reflection in order to realise their contribution as workers and individuals, aiming to gain recognition at work. Here, relational labour is a source for creators to get in touch with their subjective identities, develop their self-esteem and thus gain recognition.

In line with this, Eliane links relational labour to self-development and self-care as a way of protecting oneself in a stigmatise environment: 'Like I said, most people say good things about our physical form and personality, and it makes me feel more empowered because I started to look at myself in a different way and to learn to like things in myself'. As a result, 'it makes me want to take care of myself, to work on my physiognomy, because that is something that can be shut down very quickly in this job'. Eliane shows that erotic work tends to be seen as degrading to one's self-image, which can be offset by fulfilling interactions that highlight creators' qualities: 'I keep discovering things about myself and learning things about my body because I can keep interactions that allows me to grow'.

Creators emphasise the subjective preparation involved in relational labour and the expectation of recognition that comes with it. This further complicates the motivations to engage in relational labour beyond platform infrastructure (Arriagada and Siles, 2024), financial rewards (Baym, 2018), and platform-based creative work models that require building and maintaining an audience (Glatt, 2024; Hair, 2021). There is a layer of

symbolic reward through recognition at work that the existing literature has yet to address. Interviewees show that they expect the fulfilment of their identity claims and their subjective investment (Dejours, 2014) in connecting with audiences, demonstrating the crucial dimension of relational labour for their identity constitution.

Nevertheless, interviewees recognise that connecting with the audience can be harmful and may not lead to improved self-esteem. For this reason, there is a constant need to balance what creators define as positive and negative interactions to protect their self-esteem. What is at stake in relational labour is creators' self-perception and confidence, especially in a morally devalued work activity, which has a higher potential to degrade workers' selves (Molinier, 2012). Harms inflicted by the audience may lead to misrecognition, contributing to workers' subjective suffering and loss of self-esteem (Dejours, 2014).This is particularly true for women, who claim to face more risks of harm in their interactions with audiences than their male counterparts. Cibele, for example, reckons that 'there're lots of crazy people out there following us, I know that for a fact. They tend to be very stupid with us, even if we give them what they want, all the attention. There's no rule'. She explains that 'this work is stigmatised and so are we, and people know they can treat us like nothing if they want to. It's not easy to maintain positive interactions, but we need to understand how to differentiate'. As a result, 'it's not easy for us to preserve our self-esteem when people attack us'. Cibele recounts how she left one of these interactions in tears after being insulted by a follower for her looks and erotic performance. Such interactions are a real threat to how creators see and define themselves.

Furthermore, disrespectful and harmful interactions demonstrate that symbolic reward and positive identity formation through relational labour are much more of an effort than a given. Manuel illustrates it: 'I'm very realistic, I think relationships with users are helpful to make you feel better and see yourself differently, but the road is not paved with roses' due to disrespect. In this sense, 'it's not as if you rebuild your self-esteem and keep it intact along the way. Most of the time it breaks down and has to be rebuilt several times'. By repeatedly reassessing and rebuilding self-esteem, creators balance positive and negative interactions and strive to gain recognition for their relational labour.

Consequently, just as the rewards of relational labour must be considered in terms of the gains for the workers' subjective formation, so its dangers must be considered in terms of the loss of one's improved self-perception. As Dejours (2012) discusses, opportunities for recognition at work are limited and unevenly distributed, which can result in damage to workers' identities as a result of psychic distress caused by disrespect and misrecognition. Since recognition speaks to subjective expectations and the ascribed value of the work and workers (Smith and Deranty, 2012b), it is fundamental to examine the impact of misrecognition on creators' subjective identities, thereby advancing the existing scholarship focused on relational labour consequences. This is critical as it defines how and to what extent creators can gain recognition through relational labour, complicating the rewards and dangers associated with it.

Audience validation of creators' personalities and personal images

Relational labour goes beyond providing creators with improved self-esteem, but is said to give them a positive self-relationship, reinforcing the value of their personality and

personal image. Whereas self-esteem is based on social approval of one's abilities and traits, self-relationship is rooted in building trust in one's own value as a subject and worker (Deranty, 2010). Nina's narrative gives a sense of how creators frame this:

> I spent much time with a shattered image of myself, especially as I work with erotic content. But the amount of compliments I've received about who I am, how interesting and fun I am, has really boosted my self-worth and helped me build a better image of myself.

For interviewees, interacting with users is a way of getting a better sense of their subjective identity and personality and how they are seen by others. Camille, for example, says: 'In the past I couldn't see myself as someone I liked, but my audience made me realise that I am charming and very much appreciated for who I am'. As she got closer to her audience, 'this feeling grew and I started to see myself as someone I like to be, that I can be who I want to be, even working with content, and other people will see the same in me'. Nina and Camille address how working with erotic content can cause distrust in one's personality and self-worth, which was counterbalances by recognition gained through relational labour. In this case, recognition refers to the feeling of a positive self-relationship, allowing creators to develop trust in the value of their identity (Dejours, 2014).

Interviewees acknowledge the ambivalence of their relationships with their audiences and admit to placing more emphasis on rewarding interactions when reflecting on their personality and personal image in order to build trust in themselves. Carolina explains:

> I'm not saying that all interactions with my audience are wonderful, sometimes I have a bad day and some terrible interactions. I think everybody does. But I'd say there's always a reward because there's always one person who gives you affection and comfort, who really knows you.

Carolina goes on to say that 'there are some people with whom we really develop a personal relationship, even a friendship, who know me intimately. And that's what helps me to like myself more and see myself better, to value myself and get self-worth'. To cultivate a positive self-relationship, creators maintain long-term relationships with the part of their audience that offers fulfilling interactions. Thus, what is seen as relational labour is associated with positive rather than negative relationships, since the latter are interrupted as soon as they occur. In this way, creators can manage how they perceive and feel about themselves and avoid further harm.

The literature has delved into the strategies creators employ to circumvent harmful interactions when performing relational labour (Hair, 2021), especially marginalised creators (Glatt, 2024). What the interviewees show is that these strategies are aimed at harnessing the benefits in terms of recognition they believe they can derive from creator–audience relationships, especially in terms of reinforcing the value of their personalities and personal images. The role of relational labour is therefore to support creators' subjective expectations to develop trust in themselves, taking advantage of affirming relationships to measure the worth of their personal qualities (Dejours, 2014). Interviewees recognise that a positive self-relationship depends on a reassurance from others (Smith and Deranty, 2012b), for which relational labour is a source. It attests to relational labour

deep embeddedness in workers' subjective lives due to its intersubjective nature, being a realm where recognitive relationships take place.

On the other hand, relationships defined as 'bad' or 'negative' can directly serve as a means of rethinking and strengthening creators' positive self-relationship. Developing a positive self-relationship through relational labour requires keeping sight of disrespectful interactions and finding ways to circumvent the damage they may cause, especially when the interactions are fuelled by stigmatising assumptions. This is why creators mention these interactions to show how they helped them to appreciate their 'bad qualities', thereby increasing confidence in their personalities and personal images. Ana claims that

> The most interesting thing for me is that I even started to like my flaws and my bad qualities because I get some bad shit in my interactions and complaints, but I get much more compliments on my good qualities and I learned how to appreciate my bad qualities and things that I didn't like in my personality before. It's been a total liberation for me.

Disrespectful relationships can be seen as triggers to restore the sense of self-worth and drive individuals to seek recognition collectively or individually (Smith and Deranty, 2012a). In the context of work, disrespect drives workers to develop strategies to overcome the moral wound, setting up in the process their expectations of fair treatment and recognition (Dejours et al., 2018). Through these lenses, the harmful outcomes of relational labour enter a complex field where they can be used as a source of resistance to depreciation.

In line with the above, interviewees position conflicting interactions as minor occurrences in comparison to fulfilling ones, which help them to filter which interactions are meaningful to their identity and personal image. Laura explains: 'I know my worth because I have much more positive interactions than bad ones. It's very difficult to face and overcome bad interactions, I won't lie, it's hard work, but in the end, they help a lot in your self-development'. According to her, 'I've learnt to value myself more, like myself more and trust myself more even in bad interactions, because the way I see myself today is completely different, I trust myself a lot more'. Creators go to great lengths to protect themselves from 'bad' interactions, developing coping mechanisms that turn potential harm into an affirmation of their personalities and personal images. In the process, they claim to discover a way to cultivate a more positive self-relationship and assign value to their identities.

It is important to note, however, that not all detrimental relationships can be circumvented and used to gain recognition. As Eliane shows, 'we work hard to maintain our sense of self-worth, and there're forms of harassment that destroy you. Some users even become aggressive. I've been insulted once'. According to her, this happens because 'people think they can treat us any way they want because we're sex workers. It's not easy for us to keep our shit together because sometimes we get treated really badly. Every time that happens, it breaks something down there'. This narrative points to the danger that creators face of losing their positive self-relationship as a result of how stigma travels through relational labour. When 'negative' interactions are embedded in stigma, creators find it difficult to develop strategies to turn them into affirmations of their identities and personal images. Here, harm refers to the potential dissolution of

workers' subjective expectations of recognition, destroying the opportunities they would have to build trust in themselves (Smith and Deranty, 2012a).

Stigmatisation is a concern for female interviewees in respect of their identities and personal images. Male creators report harmful interactions with their audiences but not directly related to the stigma of sex work. Molinier (2012) explains that gender expectations contribute to the moral devaluation of certain workers, reinforcing the lower value of their subjective identities and social worth (Molinier, 2012). Female erotic creators therefore need to manage and be aware of stigmatising relationships in order to protect their identities. Ana claims that interactions with the audience 'can go both ways, they can love you and shower you with compliments and affirmations, or they can be aggressive and oppressive'. Although the former is more common, 'it's not easy to always maintain your self-worth'. Angelica adds that 'there're conflicts because this job is full of prejudices, and we know that users can turn them against us at any time. There's a silver lining that we try not to cross in order to keep the interactions fulfilling'. In this case, it is harder to gain recognition at work and avoid the threat of distrust in one's identity due to disrespectful relationships (Molinier, 2012). The findings highlight the need for further discussion of power imbalances and gender dynamics in relational work, as explored by Glatt (2024) and Ye et al. (2023). As Molinier (2012) shows, symbolic judgements of a work and a group of workers, especially in terms of gender, intervene in the possibility of establishing recognitive relationships and achieving recognition at work. This also means that certain workers will be more exposed to harmful forms of moral injury, such as the loss of a positive self-relationship and distrust in their identity. It is particularly crucial depending on the status of the work (Molinier, 2012), as in the case of erotic content creation.

Understanding the rewards and harms in relational labour needs to take into consideration the moral position of a specific form of work. This means that, in addition to the positionality of the creators themselves – in terms of gender and race – the moral status of the work and the worker has important implications for how relational labour can or cannot provide fulfilling subjective rewards in the form of recognition. Therefore, the outcomes of relational work, especially for workers' subjective identities, need to be analysed in terms of how power imbalances take shape for particular workers and allow for establishing recognitive relationships.

Conclusion

The article examines the consequences of relational labour for Brazilian erotic content creators, focusing on processes of subjectivity and identity formation through ongoing intersubjective interactions with audiences. It highlights the subjective investment and symbolic rewards that come from doing relational labour. Interviewees reveal a longing for recognition through narratives of improved self-esteem and positive self-relationship, aiming to develop a fulfilling sense of self through relational labour. Rather than being a straightforward achievement, gaining recognition is an ongoing effort that requires creators to navigate harmful interactions and their consequent moral wounds. It is important to emphasise that recognition is not tied to creators' monetisation goals. While engaging with audiences often involves selling content and generating income,

recognitive relationships are seen as beyond transactional interactions, enhancing the moral value attributed to creators as workers and social subjects through genuine bonds.

The findings point to the need to further debate the subjective dimension of relational labour and its impact on workers' identities. The interviews show how relational labour mediates creators' sense of self, influencing how they develop self-esteem and confidence in their identities and personal images. Recognition at work as devised by the Psychodynamics of Work (Dejours, 2014) helps to illuminate the subjective constitution through relational labour, advancing the accounts on subjective effects in terms of mental health and wellbeing (Baym, 2015, 2018).

In addition, the results reveal the intricate interplay between relational labour, power relations and subjective constitution. Creators' social identity in terms of gender, together with the status of the work performed, counts for the distribution of recognition in relational labour. Recognition at work indicates that the moral position of work intervenes in the possibilities of establishing recognitive relationships in a given workplace (Molinier, 2012). The interviews describe the many levels that creators must navigate to minimise harm and gain recognition, complicating the approach to the rewards and risks of relational labour.

Three main contributions to the scholarship on relational labour emerge from this research. First, it points to additional motivations for doing relational labour, particularly related to the desire to derive subjective and symbolic reward from it. While the extant literature has focused on the pressure to maintain a relationship with audiences as a result of the imperatives of social media (Arriagada and Siles, 2024; Hair, 2021), this article shows that creators also engage in relational labour because of the possibility of developing an improved self-esteem and a positive self-relationship.

Second, it shows the complexity of relational labour for creators' subjectivities arising from the duality of recognition and disrespect, self-fulfilment and degradation in relationships with audiences. This complicates perspectives on harms and rewards of relational work (Bonifacio et al., 2023; Ye et al., 2023) and how creators must navigate both in order to maintain their positive sense of self. In this sense, deriving recognition from relational labour is more of a possibility rather than a guaranteed outcome, to be sought and worked for in interactions that are not always fulfilling and respectful for creators.

Finally, it further explores the role of power relations and stigma in relational labour, showing that the positionality of creators (Glatt, 2024; Ye et al., 2023) goes hand in hand with the status of the work performed, affecting the possibilities of deriving recognition from relational labour. While stigma and power relations diminish the possibilities of symbolic rewards, relational labour can be a source of striving for recognition to counterbalance stigma. Drawing on positive interactions with audiences, creators can lay the ground for developing their self-esteem and positive self-relationship in the face of stigma.

The article contributes to the further understanding of relational labour, especially for marginalised and stigmatised creators. It points to the need for more research focusing on the embeddedness of subjectivity and identity in relational labour, notably in contexts where power relations are particularly salient. In addition, it brings as an urgent agenda to comprehend the ambivalences that arise from the link between rewards and harms in relationships with audiences. Future research could explore audience perceptions to further explore this issue.

Funding

ORCID iD

Lorena Caminhas https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1009-3880

Notes

1. Privacy is a Brazilian patronage platform founded in 2020 that allows the sale of erotic content. It follows the same interface structure and business model based on subscriptions as Onlyfans.
2. Today, Brazil counts on only one camming platform, Camera Prive (CP), founded in 2013. Until 2023, the country counted on two major camming platforms, which merged to form the largest Latin American camming platform.
3. Caboclo is a racial/ethnic identification for a mestizo of white and Indigenous descent.

References

Abilio L (2020) Plataformas digitais e uberização: a globalização de um sul administrado? *Contracampo* 39(1): 12–26.

Arriagada A and Siles I (2024) The mutual configurations of affordances and technological frames: content creators in the Chilean influencer industry. *Convergence* 30(1): 572–587.

Baym N (2015) Connect with your audience! The relational labor of connection. *The Communication Review* 18(1): 14–22.

Baym N (2018) *Playing to the Crowd. Musicians, Audiences, and the Intimate Work of Connection*. New York: New York University Press.

Bishop S (2025) Influencer creep: how artists strategically navigate the platformisation of art worlds. *New Media & Society* 27(4): 2109–2126.

Bonifacio R, Hair L and Wohn D (2023) Beyond fans: the relational labor and communication practices of creators on Patreon. *New Media & Society* 25(10): 2684–2703.

Braun V and Clarke V (2022) Conceptual and design thinking for thematic analysis. *Qualitative Psychology* 9(1): 3–26.

Caminhas L (2025) Precarity revisited: exploring camming work in Brazil and experiences of precarity in platform-based (erotic) content production. *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 28(1): 116–132.

Cardoso D and Scarcelli C (2021) The bodies of the (digitised) body: experiences of sexual (ised) work on OnlyFans. *Mediekultur* 37(71): 98–121.

Cardoso D, Chronaki D and Scarcelli M (2022) Digital sex work? Creating and selling explicit content in OnlyFans. In: Krijnen T, Nixon P, Ravenscroft M, et al. (eds) *Identities and Intimacies on Social Media*. London: Routledge, pp. 169–184.

Cunningham S and Craig D (2019) *Social Media Entertainment. The New Intersection of Hollywood and Silicon Valley*. New York: New York University Press.

Cunningham S and Craig D (2021) Introduction. In: Cunningham S and Craig D (eds) *Creator Culture. An Introduction to Global Social Media Entertainment*. New York: New York University Press, pp. 1–21.

Dejours C (2012) From the psychopathology to the psychodynamics of work. In: Smith N and Deranty J (eds) *New Philosophies of Labour. Work and the Social Bond*. Leiden; Boston, MA: Brill, pp. 209–250.

Dejours C (2014) Work and self-development: the point of view of the psychodynamics of work. *Critical Horizons* 15(2): 115–130.

Dejours C, Deranty J, Renault E, et al. (2018) *The Return of Work in Critical Theory. Self, Society, Politics*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Deranty J (2010) Work as transcendental experience: implications of Dejour's psychodynamics for contemporary social theory and philosophy. *Critical Horizons* 11(2): 181–220.

Díaz-Benitez M (2018) Porn in Brazil. A study of sex networks, erotic conventions and careers. In: Baltar M (ed.) *E Pornô, Tem Pornô? A Panorama of Brazilian Porn*. Milan: Mimesis International, pp. 64–95.

Easterbrook-Smith G (2022) OnlyFans as gig-economy: a nexus of precarity and stigma. *Porn Studies* 10(3): 252–267.

Evans J and Baym N (2022) The audacity of clout (chasing): digital strategies of Black youth in Chicago DIY hip-hop. *International Journal of Communication* 16: 2669–2687.

Fernandes E (2023) Depressão, ansiedade e distanciamento social: os males da pornografia. *Correio Braziliense, 12 July.* Available in: https://www.correiobraziliense.com.br/revista-do-correio/2023/07/5106568-depressao-ansiedade-e-distanciamento-social-os-males-da-por-nografia.html (accessed 12 December 2024).

Giusti M and Torres V (2024) Especialistas alertam para os perigos do vício em pornografia digital. *Correio Braziliense, 29 October*. Available in: https://www.correiobraziliense.com.br/brasil/2024/10/6975633-especialistas-alertam-para-os-perigos-do-vicio-em-pornografia-dig-ital.html (accessed 12 December 2024).

Glatt Z (2024) The intimacy triple bind: structural inequalities and relational labour in the influencer industry. *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 27(3): 424–440.

Hair L (2021) Friends, no ATMs: parasocial relational work and the construction of intimacy by artists on Patreon. *Sociological Spectrum* 41(2): 196–212.

Hair L, Bonifacio R and Wohn D (2022) Multi-platform practices among digital patronage creators. *Convergence* 28(5): 1438–1456.

Hochschild A (1983) *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Honneth A (1995) *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*. Cambridge: Polity.

Jones A (2020) *Camming. Money, Power, and Pleasure in the Sex Work Industry*. New York: New York University Press.

Meisner C and Ledbetter A (2022) Participatory branding on social media: the affordances of live streaming for creative labor. *New Media & Society* 24(5): 1179–1195.

Molinier P (2012) Care as work: mutual vulnerabilities and discrete knowledge. In: Smith N and Deranty J (eds) *New Philosophies of Labour. Work and the Social Bond*. Leiden, Boston, MA: Brill, pp. 251–270.

Neto W (2023) Concorrente do OnlyFans, Privacy diz pagar mais e dominar mercado no Brasil. *Uol Splash, 29 May*. Available in: https://www.uol.com.br/splash/noticias/2023/05/29/pri-vacy-concorrente-brasileiro-onlyfans.htm (accessed 13 March 2025).

Pruchniewska U (2017) Branding the self as an 'authentic feminist': negotiating feminist values in post-feminist digital cultural production. *Feminist Media Studies* 18(5): 810–824.

Rand H (2019) *Digital sex markets: Entrepreneurialism and consumption within an uncertain regulatory framework*. PhD Dissertation, University of Essex, UK.

Rand H and Stegeman H (2023) Navigating and resisting platform affordances: online sex work as digital labour. *Gender, Work & Organization* 30(6): 2012–2118.

Rubin G (1984) Thinking sex: notes for a radical theory of the politics of sexuality. In: Vance C (ed.) *Pleasure and Danger*. London: Routledge & Kegan, pp. 267–319.

Similarweb (2024) Privacy versus Camera Prive. *Similarweb*, 12 December. Available in: https:// pro.similarweb.com/#/digitalsuite/websiteanalysis/overview/website-performance/*/76/1m ?webSource=Total&key=privacy.com.br, cameraprive.com (accessed 12 December 2024).

Smith N and Deranty J (2012a) Work and the politics of misrecognition. *Res Publica* 18(1): 53–64.

Smith N and Deranty J (2012b) Work, recognition and the social bond: changing paradigms. In: Smith N and Deranty J (eds) *New Philosophies of Labour. Work and the Social Bond*. Leiden; Boston, MA: Brill, pp. 1–40.

Stardust Z (2019) From amateur aesthetics to intelligible orgasm: pornographic authenticity and precarious labour in the gig economy. *International Journal of Gender Studies* 8(16): 1–29.

Tran C (2022) 'Never battle alone': egirls and the gender(ed) war on video game live streaming as 'real' work. *Television & New Media* 23(5): 509–520.

Veiverberg F (2023) *Brazilian camming: The monetisation of intimacy in online sex work*. MA Thesis, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg, MS.

Wang Y (2021) The twink next door, who also does porn: networked intimacy in gay porn performers' self-presentation on social media. *Porn Studies* 8(2): 224–238.

Whitson J, Simon B and Parker F (2021) The missing producer: rethinking indie cultural production in terms of entrepreneurship, relational labour, and sustainability. *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 24(2): 606–627.

Ye Z, Dong C and Kavka M (2023) Navigating the economy of ambivalent intimacy: gender and relational labour in China's livestreaming industry. *Feminist Media Studies* 23(7): 3384–3400.

Author biography

Lorena Caminhas (PhD, University of Campinas) is an assistant professor in the Department of Media Studies at Maynooth University. Her main research interests include platform labour in the Global South, creative industries and social media, digital labour and axes of difference, and marginalised social media creators.